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Wolfowitz Shifts Rationales on Iraq War

With Weapons Unfound, Talk of Threat Gives Way to Rhetoric on Hussein, Democracy

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As the Bush administration's leading hawk on Iraq, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz has been a tireless proponent of the argument that Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction was a compelling enough reason for the United States to resort to war.

These days, his emphasis is different. In testimony to congressional committees and interviews with reporters, Wolfowitz prefers to stress the evil, dictatorial nature of former president Saddam Hussein's defunct government and the opportunity to turn Iraq into a beacon of hope for the rest of the Middle East. He depicts Iraq as the focus of a life-and-death struggle between the forces of democracy and the forces of intolerance.

Wolfowitz is by no means alone. Since the fall of Baghdad five months ago, senior administration officials from President Bush downward have been reinventing the rationale for war. In his television address Sunday night, Bush barely mentioned Hussein's chemical and biological weapons programs. Instead, he described Iraq as "the central front" in the war on terror, the site of a desperate last stand by the "enemies of freedom," who include former Hussein loyalists and foreign terrorists.

Even opponents of the war acknowledge that now that the United States is in Iraq, it cannot afford to fail, in effect conceding that the invasion has created its own justification. There is broad agreement across the political spectrum that a premature withdrawal of U.S. troops would destabilize the entire region and undermine U.S. credibility.

Congressional critics of Bush's policy suspect that the new administration line on winning the peace is designed to distract attention from the failure to find evidence of Hussein's biological, chemical or nuclear weapons programs. When Wolfowitz appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the end of July to share impressions from a visit to Iraq, he was chided by Sen. Lincoln D. Chafee (R-R.I.) for skirting the issue of weapons of mass destruction.

"I don't think [Wolfowitz and other administration officials] are being forthright," said Chafee, the sole Republican senator to vote against the war. "They are using whatever argument is most marketable at any given time."

In a telephone interview Saturday, Wolfowitz denied that the administration is providing different justifications for the war with Iraq. He said he and other administration officials had been "clear from the beginning" that there were three arguments for invading Iraq: halting the development of weapons of mass destruction, liberating the country from "a terrible tyranny," and creating a democratic model that would serve as an inspiration for the rest of the Middle East.

"I was often criticized for talking too much about what Iraq could become when it was liberated, and I believed it has to become," Wolfowitz said. "We have to win [this war], and when we win it, I believe it will advance American interests."

While it is true that Wolfowitz has long advocated a free and democratic Iraq, an examination of his speeches before and after the war nevertheless reveals a clear shift of emphasis away from the focus on weapons of mass destruction as the primary reason for going to war. During the run-up to the war, Wolfowitz argued that "disarming Iraq of its chemical and biological weapons and dismantling its nuclear weapons program is a crucial part of winning the war on terror."

"This is not a game; it is deadly serious," he told the Council on Foreign Relations in January, in a speech aimed at convincing the country's foreign policy elite of the case for war. "We are dealing with a threat to the security of our nation and the world."

More recently, on "The Charlie Rose Show" on PBS, Wolfowitz poured cold water on the why-did-we-go-to-war debate in the United States. " 'Why are you Americans so obsessed about weapons of mass destruction?' " he quoted Iraqis as asking him during his visit to Iraq. " 'Saddam Hussein was [himself] a weapon of mass destruction. The damage that he did to our country was a weapon of mass destruction.' "

A 1,200-strong team from the Defense Intelligence Agency has been scouring the country for evidence of chemical weapons for the past two months.

"There's no question that the administration has shifted its ground" on the reasons for war, said Leslie H. Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations and a supporter of the war. "They have gone from Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction and a hint of his connections to al Qaeda to making the Middle East safe for democracy and getting rid of the tyrant."

Walter Russell Mead, another council member who listened to Wolfowitz's presentation in January, said the administration had made a mistake by deciding to make Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction the centerpiece of the case for war. He said there were stronger arguments for invading Iraq, including the long-term political and economic costs of containing Hussein in the decade that followed the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

"The administration should have argued that a root cause of much of the terrorism in the Middle East was the political instability caused by Saddam Hussein," said Mead, who referred to the need to keep tens of thousands of U.S. troops stationed in Saudi Arabia to deter Hussein from further adventures such as the invasion of Kuwait. "I think the administration is making a better case now. I wish they had made it at the time."

Mead and other analysts noted that the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia is a core grievance of Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda terrorist organization. Hussein's overthrow has enabled the United States to close down its operations at the Prince Sultan Air Base south of Riyadh, the Saudi capital.

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